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About the Cover. The summer Olympics are a video as well as an athletic event. Cover photo by Vittorio Sartor; neon by Neon City Inc.

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Arcade Alley

Electronic Games

Games with Character

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



'Rod Hero' to the rescue in 'H.E.R.O.'; striking gold for the Atari 2600.

Conceiving games around identifiable and individualized characters has become more common in the last year or so. The desire to exploit licensed properties like "Pac-Man," "Donkey Kong," and the "Smurfs" is a factor, but the most important reason is undoubtedly the simplest: players like character games because they are more involving. This month let's look at a few recent computer and video games that have attempted to hop aboard the bandwagon.

Saving doomed miners from subterranean graves is the goal in **H.E.R.O.** (Activision/Atari 2600/cartridge), a 256-screen program by a relatively new designer, John Van Ryzin. The arcader uses the joystick to maneuver the rescuer by means of the copper-pack strapped to his back. The airborne protagonist is armed with a standard-issue zap gun and also has a limited supply of explosives which come in handy for blowing a path through obstructing walls.

When "H.E.R.O."'s hero reaches a trapped miner, he must give the victim a reviving gust of oxygen before traveling even deeper into the labyrinthine passages. Dangers include snakes which dart from side tunnels and bizarre insects that swarm through many of the mine shafts. "H.E.R.O." is a marvelously playable game that rivals "Pitfall II" in overall scope. To the dedicated electronic gamer, finding a

program of this quality for the humble Atari 2600 is better than striking gold.

Sammy Lightfoot (Sierra On-Line/Colecovision-Adam/cartridge), his long hair waving in the breeze, bounces on trampolines, hops from platform to platform, and swings across chasms on the slenderest of ropes in a multiphase jumping-and-climbing contest. This circus-themed action game has been available for several popular home computers but has not previously been produced for a video-game machine.

Graphics are plain and audio only average, but what really keeps this cartridge from being a significant addition to the library of Colecovision software is the woeful instruction folder. Cuteness isn't a viable substitute for hard facts. Take this typical passage, which appears in the rulebook under the heading "How to Play Sammy Lightfoot": "Ladies and gentlemen, let me direct your attention to our center ring. . . . Sammy will leap huge circus balls and fly through the air over scorching flames. . . . Finally, to amaze and delight you, Sammy will swing on a trick rope"

This is actually a half-baked description of the game's basic play-mechanic, but there's no attempt to relate this abstract theme to specific situations. For instance, the rules don't mention that the gamer must hold down the action button on the joystick for the entire time during which Sammy is swinging on a rope.

The cartridge itself is moderately entertaining. The trampolines are a fresh element, and a few timely

humorous touches, such as the pumpkin in sunglasses who guards the end of the first playscreen, are welcome.

Bruce Lee (DataSoft/Atari home computers/32K disk), master of the martial-arts movies, is dead but his legend continues to grow through posthumously released films and this multi-art action/adventure. The secret of eternal life and untold treasures await Lee, but the path through nearly two dozen multiscreen playfields is byzantine and arduous.

Giving our hero grief are the hulking Green Yamo and the sinister Ninja. The former moves slower than Lee, but one blow from a kingsize foot can send the lighter hero reeling across the screen. There are also automatic defenses, such as electrically charged gateways, that can cost Lee one of the three "falls" with which he begins the game.

Although basically a solitaire game, "Bruce Lee" includes a pair of two-player options. The contestants can either alternate against a computer-controlled Ninja and Yamo, or players can alternate controlling Bruce Lee and Green Yamo, with the computer retaining direction of the Ninja. Playfield graphics don't attain state-of-the-art complexity but are smooth and top-quality overall.

"Bruce Lee" is exactly the kind of action game most computerists want. Things happen at a good clip, but strategy is much more important than mere stick-twiddling for ultimate success.